WALL STREET JOURNAL 29 SEP 1975

Robert Redford vs. the CIA

Three Days of the Condor

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

Robert Redford's Joseph Turner is a bright and spirited young man, slightly offbeat in his life style (he rides a motorcycle from his Greenwich Village apartment to his job on Manhattan's upper Eastside; he admires both Einstein and Dick Tracy) and slightly offbeat in his choice of profession. Turner, not without a touch of self-amusement, is paid to read, analyze and computerize murder mysteries and spy stories. His employer, nominally the American Literary Historical Society, is in fact Section 9, Department 17 of the CIA.

One rainy day, Turner goes out to get lunch for his colleagues on the small ALHS staff. Coffee containers and sandwiches in

On Film

"Three Days of the Condor"

hand, he returns to discover that everyone in the office has been murdered only moments before—the receptionist's cigaret is still smoldering. As frightened for his life as he is stunned by the massacre before him, Turner grabs a revolver from a desk drawer, rushes out of the office, and using his code name, Condor, calls the CIA panic number to report what has happened and beg safety for himself.

Thus begins "Three Days of the Condor," a well-made entertainment that handles with ease and expertise the tricks of the thriller trade. Directed fluently and with a fine sense of pace by Sydney Pollack and stylishly photographed by Owen Roizman, it manages in a matter of moments to set up the perfect thriller nightmare—one in which what is recognizable and therefore safe is suddenly transformed into the strange and dangerous. The actual New York streets Turner walked down so jauntily that very morning now seem populated by potential assassins; his relaxed and friendly office has turned into a morgue; his apartment, filled with unknown visitors, has become a death-trap. And when the agent sent by the CIA to bring him in from the cold turns and fires at him, Turner's entire world seems to have become a crazed and grim shooting gallery in which he himself is the single target.

Such menace is the stuff that thrillers are made of. But we as audience are only drawn into that threat and tension when we are given, as we are here, a hero we can care about and identify with. Turner, as our surrogate in this adventure, is most importantly a thoroughly plausible character. Though simply a researcher for the CIA and not trained at all for field work, he has spent his life reading tales of adventure. And it is not unlikely that he would have developed a sharp sense of danger and an instinct for solving mystery. It's fairly likely, too, that his reading would have made him resourceful—that he would think to arm himself and to kidnap at gunpoint an absolute stranger, Faye Dunaway's Kathy Hale, whose Brooklyn Heights apartment might provide him with a hide-out.

Robert Redford, moreover, lends to Turner's likeable character a good deal of his own distinctive appeal—an appeal that is more than a matter of his glittering good looks. Like those stars of a previous age—James Stewart, Gary Cooper, and Gregory Peck—whose Lincolnesque stature helped persuade us of the strength and sincerity of their characters, Redford's clean-cut handsomeness recalls something of the Kennedys and suggests that beneath the boyish charm and knock-'em-dead smile lie intelligence and a sense of serious purpose.

If we believe in Turner, though, we believe somewhat less in Kathy, since her role ultimately comes off as having less to do with advancing the thriller plot than with the box office dynamic of Redford and Dunaway as lovers. Still, as an attractive and sensitive professional photographer convincingly played by Ms. Dunaway, Kathy does become part of the film's recognizable New York environment and so of the authentically created every-day world whose abrupt shift to strangeness is so crucial in giving thrillers their unnerving effect.

But besides a realistic atmosphere and a credible hero, this thriller absorbs us on a more immediate level. By making the source of its menace a renegade operation within the CIA "Three Days of the Condor" very much addresses itself both to the headlines we've been reading and to growing public concern with accountability and control of secret government activities. Here, not only are the Congress, the President, and the public unaware of certain CIA actions, but even the CIA itself has no knowledge of, and therefore no control over, the activities of some of its agents. At one moment in the film, a top level CIA official played by John Houseman, wearily attempting to unravel the mystery and confusion surrounding "Condor," reminisces with a colleague about his work during the great war. "You miss that kind of action?" his colleague asks. "No," Houseman replies, "I miss that kind of clarity."

Such moral clarity, at any rate, was to be found in political thrillers of other eras which reflected the black and white issues of their more idealistic times. Remember how the evil Axis conspired against the good Allies in such movies as "Notorious" and "Sabotage"? "Three Days of the Condor," however, reflects the more ambiguous conflicts that arise in our skeptical present. The villains here are not traitors working for an enemy government. They, and the heroes as well, are working for what they apparently believe to be in the best interests of our own nation. Their acts are aimed, we are told, at helping the United States gain influence in oil-producing nations. The issue then becomes the very up-to-date one of the rightness of means rather than the validity of ends.

And the moral quandary that such issues place us in is further underscored by a clever twist of Lorenzo Semple Jr. and David Rayfiel's screenplay in which the foreign assassin hired by the unauthorized CIA group is, though threatening throughout most of the film, made peculiarly sympathetic at the end. Max Von Sydow's Joubert is no evil or greedy mercenary, but an intelligent and highly skilled professional whose line of work just happens to be covert action and assassination. Soft-spoken and outwardly decent, Joubert simply sees each job as a "business arrangement" in which there is "no need to believe in either side." The only beliefs that count, he tells Turner, are in any case "Belief in yourself . . . and in your own precision."

Turner, though, doesn't agree. Unlike Joubert, he cannot work without moral concern for his actions or without a sense of responsibility for the ultimate purpose of what he does. He cannot become, in other words, a specialist for our time. But Turner, this often shrewd thriller suggests, may just be out of his time. Resigning from the CIA and giving his story to The New York Times (which may or may not print it), he is warned by those agents who helped him earlier that he is about "to become a very lonely man." Thrillers of old generally tied up their mystery, did away with their terror, and left their heroes safe and secure. It's the particularly contemporary bite of this entertainment that it offers neither Turner nor us such comfort.